



TITLE:

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CITATION:

Kurita, Tokika. The Writing System and Attitudes towards People with Disabilities. Finding Meaning, Cultures Across Borders: International Dialogue between Philosophy and Psychology 2011: 115-118

ISSUE DATE:

2011-03-31

URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2433/143054>

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The Writing System and Attitudes towards People with Disabilities

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Great interest has been focused on the label of 'disabled people' in many countries. In Japan, recently the label of 'disabled' people was changed to express from kanji (Chinese character) to hiragana (Japanese character). The loaded purpose of this change is to improve the attitude toward disabled people because kanji 'disabled' connoted negative images. This research investigated the effect of writing system of hiragana 'disabled' people on the attitude toward disabled people. Two groups of undergraduate/graduate students answered the questionnaire about the attitude toward disabled people in kanji (usual writing system) or in hiragana (suggested writing system). The results revealed that students who have previous contact with disabled people increased positive images of disabled people, however, this effect disappeared in students who didn't have previous contact. Moreover, negative images of and communication attitudes toward disabled people changed neither student with nor without previous contact. These findings show that the writing system of disabled people in hiragana has limited effect on overcoming a wall of prejudice toward disabled people. This research can provide insight into understanding on prospect and range of the label changes.

INTRODUCTION

There are three writing systems in Japanese, *kanji*, *hiragana*, and *katakana*. *Kanji* is ideogrammatic, where one character has meaning in itself. *Hiragana* and *katakana* are phonographic, which is phoneme-based and one character doesn't have meaning itself. *Hiragana* and *katakana* express meaning by combination of phonemes. One object which has the same meaning can be expressed by any of the three kinds of writing system. However, different writing systems make different images. In actual fact, the *hiragana* brings to mind a particular image related to roundness or softness (Ukita, Sugishima, Minagawa, Inoue & Gasyu, 1996).

Various labels of disability are used in many countries and this topic has been hotly-debated. Attitudes toward people with disabilities differ because of the perception of the disability label (e.g. Dooley & Glimmer, 1989). In Japan, we call people with disabilities *shougaisha*. The label used of people with disabilities has been *kanji* (i.e. 障害者). However, recently the writing system used to refer to people with disabilities has been changing (i.e. 障がい者). The *kanji* of 害 (*gai*) has negative meanings such as damage and danger, therefore it is changing from *kanji* to *hiragana* today. Because *hiragana* connoted positive images (above-mentioned), the deliberate intention of this change was to improve the attitude toward people with disabilities. If it is true, the *hiragana* description of people with disabilities may increase positive

images toward people with disabilities. However, this hypothesis has not yet been examined.

When considering the effect of attitudes towards people with disabilities, previous research has shown that contact experience had a major impact (e.g. Allport, 1954). Yamauchi (1996) suggested that society needed information about people with disabilities and that this was necessary in addition to contact experience. In fact, Otani's study (2001) indicated the effect of such information differed by contact experience. The writing system such as *kanji* or *hiragana* is one of the means through which attitudes towards disabled people are expressed. Thus, it is necessary to investigate the effect of the *hiragana* writing system on people with disabilities from the viewpoint of contact experience.

Moreover, on the point of improving attitudes toward people with disabilities, it is important to think about actual interactions with them. It is necessary to consider not only images of people with disabilities, but also attitudes towards communication and interaction with them.

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of using *hiragana* and the label 'people with disabilities' (i.e. 障がい者) on the attitude toward people with disabilities based on their contact experience.

METHOD

Procedure: 348 Graduate/undergraduate students (Mage= 19.9, SD= 2.1) participated in this study. Questionnaires were distributed and were responded to during classes. Questionnaires were of 2 kinds: one where people were described as using *kanji* (i.e. 障害者), the other where people were described as using *hiragana* (i.e. 障がい者).

Questionnaire: This study used a disability image scale and communication attitude scale (Kawauchi, 2003; 2004). The disability scale was a semantic differential scale and consisted of 21 adjectives (e.g., comfortlessness, painful, hang in, sunny). Participants were asked to rate the degree of agreement in relation to the adjectives on a 7 point scale (the midpoint was 4). Higher score indicated a stronger image of that adjective toward people with disabilities. The communication scale included three sub-scales: 'confusion', 'shallow friendship' and 'deep friendship'. The confusion scale measured confusion towards communication with people with disabilities (e.g. I can't talk to people with disabilities friendly) on a 6 point scale (degree of agreement). The shallow friendship scale measured friendship that is superficial communication with people with disabilities (e.g. I invite people with disabilities to public dinner) on a 5 point scale degree of resistance. The deep friendship scale measured friendship exhibiting deeper communication (e.g. I say what I really think to people with disabilities) on a 5 point scale degree of resistance. Lower scores indicated positive communication attitude with people with disabilities. Finally, respondents were asked to whether they had previous contact with people with disabilities (yes or no).

RESULTS

Image of disability kanji vs. hiragana: The image scale comprised negative images (e.g. difficulty, sad) and positive images (e.g. respectable, great). The average point was calculated among each subcomponents (Table 1) and a 2 (*kanji* vs. *hiragana* description) \times 2 (previous contact vs. no contact) ANOVA conducted. The interaction effect showed on positive image ($F(1, 312) = 6.69, p < .05$). People with previous contact reported a higher positive image when 'people with disabilities' was written in *hiragana* ($F(1,312) = 4.48, p < .05$). No effects were revealed for participants without contact experience. Also, no significant results for the negative images were observed. This showed that the use of hiragana affected attitudes towards people with disabilities only amongst those who had previous contact with people with disabilities.

Communication attitude kanji vs. hiragana: The average point was calculated among each subscale ('confusion', 'shallow friendship' and 'deep friendship' (table 1) and a 2 (*kanji* vs. *hiragana* description) \times 2 (previous contact vs. no contact) ANOVA conducted. There were neither main nor interaction effects. That is, the use of the *hiragana* writing system has no effect on communication attitude. The main effect of contact experience on confusion and shallow friendship scale was significant, respectively ($F(1, 312) = 21.45, p < .01$ and $F(1, 312) = 9.01, p < .05$). People with contact experience have more positive communication attitudes toward people with disabilities than people without contact experience.

Table 1 Average of each scale (SD)

	Contact($n=164$)		No contact($n=152$)	
	Kanji ($n=83$)	Hiragana ($n=81$)	Kanji ($n=76$)	Hiragana ($n=76$)
Image				
Negative image	4.84(0.71)	4.86(0.87)	4.59(1.02)	4.71(1.04)
Positive image	4.57(0.55)	4.78(0.76)	4.65(0.58)	4.50(0.61)
Communication				
Confusion	3.15(0.68)	3.05(0.82)	3.40 (0.76)	3.60(0.74)
Shallow friendship	2.30(0.80)	2.07(0.68)	2.45(0.78)	2.43(0.70)
Deep friendship	2.86(0.82)	2.71(0.73)	2.92(0.78)	2.92(0.76)

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the effect of the *hiragana* writing system on attitudes towards people with disabilities. To sum up, the effect of *hiragana* was for people with contact experience, to increase positive images about people with disabilities such as respect. The positive connotations that *hiragana* has (e.g. soft image), facilitates positive images such as respect for people with disabilities. Why was this effect observed only for people with contact experience? The problem of the label of people with disabilities has been discussed among people with more interest in people with

disabilities. People with previous contact with people with disabilities who have more interest toward them (e.g. Kawauchi & Yokkaichi, 1998) were thought to be affected because *hiragana* connoted positive meaning sensitively. This suggests that improving attitudes toward people with disabilities requires the public to have contact experience with people with disabilities and information about them (see also Yamauchi, 1996).

These results showed that the use of the hiragana writing system on people with disabilities had a limited effect on overcoming prejudice toward people with disabilities. Clearly, this topic is important, however, the effect was partial and only related to people who had contact with people with disabilities. This research can provide insight into understanding the effect of changing the way in which people with disabilities are described. Today, various measures and policies for people with disabilities have been implemented and circumstances for people with disabilities have been improved. However, by examining the effect from diverse angles it should aid future policy and practice.

A further important finding was the background of the changing description of people with disabilities based on prejudice or incorrect understanding toward people with disabilities. Future research needs to examine how to control prejudice toward people with disabilities on the basis of the limited effect of the writing system.

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